SHAUN TAN'S *THE ARRIVAL* (2006): A VISUAL POSTCOLONIAL STUDY

OF 'MIGRANT'S EXPERIENCE'

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to trace the signs of *'hybridity'* in *The Arrival* (2006) by Shaun and to establish it as visual postcolonial narrative within the domain of migration literature. The study is designed to answer these questions 'What is the *'hybrid'* identity?' 'What is the relation between multiculturalism and postcolonial studies?' 'Is the migrant's arrival accepted or not?' To answer these questions, the researcher adopts an *analytical/theoretical* approach to present a unique examination of global mobility within the 'rhetoric of hybridity' illustrated visually in a *surrealist* picturebook to universalize the *'migrant's experience'*. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, *The Arrival* has only been studied as a vivid example of multicultural literature in Australian Middle Schools to highlight diversity issues as race and ethnicity. The researcher's starting point is that postcolonial theories can underscore 'transcultural' approach that can surpass the binary opposition of center/periphery power relations and Homi Bhabha's the 'Third Space' is the central theoretical concept that lays the basis for much of this study. The findings of this study will hopefully contribute to the body of the knowledge in postcolonial studies within discourses of migration and multiculturalism.

KEYWORDS: Surrealist Visuals - Post-colonialism – Hybridity - 'Third Space'

INTRODUCTION
AIM AND SCOPE

The current study examines key concepts in postcolonial theories – *migration*, *hybrid* and *multiculturalism* in Tan's *The Arrival* (2006), a sophisticated picturebook[1] worth of serious investigation and exploration. *The Arrival* is a "migrant story told as a series of *wordless images* that might seem to come from a long forgotten time" as Tan puts it ("Picture books: Who are they for?" in www.shauntan.net). The nameless man encounters "sympathetic strangers each carrying their own *unspoken history*: *stories of struggle and survival* in a world of incomprehensible violence, upheaval and hope" (Italics mine, Tan, "Picture books: Who are they for?" in www.shauntan.net).

The selected visual narrative has only been – to the best of my knowledge- studied as a vivid example of *multicultural literature* in Middle Schools in Australia or as an activity for an English or History class to highlight *diversity* issues such as *race* and *ethnicity*. *Multicultural literature* is regarded as "important to classroom practice since it affects the development of identity in children" (Botelho, 73). Yet, I perceive it as a complex picturebook within the domain of migration literature not only intended for educational uses. The present study is *analytical/theoretical/* aiming at establishing *The Arrival* as visual postcolonial literature.

Regarding the structure, the study falls into three parts: The first part entitled 'Theorizing *The Arrival* as Visual Postcolonial Narrative': It aims at presenting the selected picturebook in a new light within postcolonial theories that highlight predicament of identity crisis, and acceptance of the difference. The second part entitled 'Tan's Visual Surrealistic Eloquence': The purpose of this part is to analyze and examine Tan's outstanding functional visuals in terms of color, shade, symbols, codes and other textual devices. The final part is the researcher's 'Recapitulations and Perspectives' that provide answers to the current research questions:

- What are the features of migrant literature?

- What is multicultural literature?

- What is *hybrid identity*?

- Is the central character's *arrival* welcomed or not?

The current study has not been studied –to my best knowledge- against the above-mentioned questions and within the paradigm of postcolonial theories and Homi Bhabha's the "Third Space' is the central theoretical concept that lays the basis for much of this study.

THEORIZING *THE ARRIVAL* AS VISUAL POSTCOLONIAL NARRATIVE

Postcolonial studies are "preoccupied with the issues of migration, *cosmopolitanism,* and identity questions" (Italics mine, Ashcroft et al., 11). Migration has been a rich foundation of *mythical* stories throughout man's history. Migration is always an emblem of the migrant's dreams, fears, alienation, and hope for a better future. Within this rationale, postcolonial theories – in our globalized age- can rebut *anti-colonial nationalist theory* and surpass colonialism. Ashcroft sustains how "hybridity and the power it releases may well be seen as the characteristic feature and contribution of post-colonial, allowing a means of evading the replications of the binary categories of the past and developing *new anti-monolithic models of cultural exchange and growth*" (Italics mine, 183). Hence, postcolonial theory can be *global* and *multicultural* beyond the center/periphery power relations. This is obviously an idealistic and celebratory view of hybrid identity.

This poses a vital question: what is *hybrid* identity? In a broad sense, the *hybrid* can mean an individual having access to two or more ethnic identities. Historically speaking, the initial use of the term hybrid was offensive and abusive, that is, a stigma in relation to colonial racist notions – "the purity of antagonistic communities" (Sibley, 410) that propagated the inferiority of mixed-breeds of white and other races and these racist communities sought protection by maintaining territorial boundaries and frontiers. In an intricate vein, the *hybrid space* is defined by the prominent postcolonial theorist, Homi Bhabha in his *Location of Culture* (1994), as the 'Third Space' described as being "productive, interruptive, interrogative and enunciative" (Bhabha, 103) to subvert dualistic vision within the realm of colonial binary thinking. In *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (1995), Robert Young, the renowned postcolonial critic, also holds the view that hybridity dismantles "the discourse of colonial authority [losing] its univocal grip on meaning and finds itself open to the trace of language of the other" (22). In a 1990 interview by Jonathan Rutherford, Bhabha states that "the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges; rather hybridity to me is the 'Third Space', which enables other positions to emerge" (Rutherford, 211). The 'Third Space' signifies the place where negotiation takes place, where identity in all its ambiguities is constructed and

reconstructed. In this context, Bhabha's rhetoric of hybridity is more sophisticated than the simple notions of multiculturalism as tolerance and mere acceptance of the difference within the humanist viewpoint.

The Arrival underscores the universality of the migrant's story. The nameless protagonist escapes a vague intimidation in the form of a black dragon-like creature circling a bleak city:

Figure 1

To my mind, *The Arrival* proposes a definition of "*cultural identity* in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective '*one true self*', hiding inside the many other 'selves'" (Italics mine, McGillis, 223). In other words, the arrivals' *diverse identities* reflect the common historical experiences that establish their state of '*oneness*':

Figure 2

The Arrival underlies the concept of melting pot that seeks a new unity out of different cultures. The final picture in *The Arrival* is apt and suggestive since the man's daughter plays a key role as a guide to another Indian migrant girl who has just arrived to this wondrous new world:

Figure 3

This visual poses a pivotal question: who is the indigenous and the non-indigenous? Hybridity underscores the

"twin processes of globalization and migration" (Papastergiadis, 3) that can empower the migrants to reclaim a part of the "Third Space" to reconstruct an interconnected collectives.

The concept of cosmopolitanism is also dramatized visually on the cover of the book designed as an old photo album depicting a strange little animal that follows the protagonist everywhere:

Figure 4

The inspirational illustration of Tan portrays a world of animals and people living together harmoniously in a fantastical metropolis:

Figure 5

Migration – within Bhabha's rhertoric of hybridity- is "how newness enters the world" (Bhabha: 1996, 227) and it is bound up with a "process of translating and transvaluing cultural differences" (Bhabha: 1996, 252). In other words, migration can be a *cultural translation* comparable to a translated text that reveals the traces of both the original language and the translated languge. In *Postcolonial Theories* (2011), Jenni Ramone contends that "the individual who migrates is translated into a new place and operates through a new language, becoming a translated individual bearing traces of both locations and languages" (115). Therefore, this visual shows how the nameless man translates his ethnic culture into a new transnational one.

Furthermore, when the protagonist finally makes his way to the shores of his new home, he is greeted by two colossal statues symbolic of a new existence and a promising future:

Figure 6

Along the way, the protagonist befriends other more well-established migrants and listens to their stories of hardships. For example, there is the wordless sharing of the old man with the cone hat. The old man's story is visually rendered as a series of images – a young bright soldier, then a war has taken place and lost one of his legs with pain-filled eyes. Tan's visuals do not just tell stories, they exhibit *a shared histroy* of people from different cultural and lingual background[2]. Tan's visuals of sharing is a world of entaglement that teaches tolerance and acceptance of cultural differences.

TAN'S VISUAL SURREALIST ELOQUENCE

The Arrival is a tale of challenges in almost a surrealist world in pencil drawings that simulate sepia photographs. It visualizes a heart-rending story within glossy pages. The book has a hard cover that resembles an old family photo album. Tan's aesthetic coherence sheds light on the significance of paratexual features that refer to the zone between text and off-text or the "threshold of interpretation" (Sipe, 292). Paratextual features are rendered in the depiction of the cover, front and end pages. The general layout marks a movement from the public space of the cover to the private world of the book. Tan's visual narrative calls upon the reader to bear knowledge of structural conventions such as panels, the use of gutter (the spaces between panels), colors, symbols and other textual devices serve to heighten the strangeness of the migrant's experience and the applicability to set him as everyman.

The cover page shows a *cosmopolitan* protagonist with Eurasian features and with a suitcase in hand. It captures the sense of adventure that overwhelms the moment of arrival to a new unfamiliar city. Tan himself describes his visuals as "strange, confronting or confusing - not to mention beyond the grasp of language" (www.shauntan.net). He illustrates a strange bustling metropolis set in contrast to the migrant's feelings of loneliness.

The visual narration is enhanced by the use of montage as manifested, for instance, in the opening pages that depict a heart-breaking scene of the husband's departure. The scene generates the effect of silent black and white movie. The use of black and white is "commonly associated with uncompromising truth and a sense of images being a documentary" (Nodelman, 100). As a wordless narration, Tan makes the best use of gestures and postures as in the clasping of hands, a symbol of unity between the migrant and his small family. This creates a rich visual narrative to document a painful moment. Moreover, visual objects – in this touching scene- become "meaningful dependent on the visual weight they have" (Nodelman, 101):

Figure 7

The illustrator uses various symbols such as the old kitchen utilities that imply the family impoverished condition, the suitcase as well as the paper bird that stands for hope for the future.

Tan's subtle magnificent visual narration reflects the emotional distress experienced by migrants as they undertake a long journey to the unknown:

Figure 8

They experience tedious migration procedures of physical investigations and interviews. Tan himself regards his images as "the power of silent narration" that describes the simplest actions that are "practical, clearly and visually economical" (Tan, "*The Artist's Notes*", www.shauntan.net). In general, Tan's visuals rely heavily on the use of the snapshots that outline minute details, for example, of the sea voyage:

Figure 9

The Arrival is visualized through the extensive use of panels, that is, multiple panels that show the sequence of action, the passage of time and minutes details, for example, of a tiresome long journey, to record mini-narratives and intense moments. It is obvious that there is a balance between the small sequenced panels and the large full page to depict panoramic images.

Tan's visual eloquence is also manifested in the scene in which the protagonist is seen opening his suitcase to find unreal image of his wife and daughter eating dinner and an empty chair is kept for him:
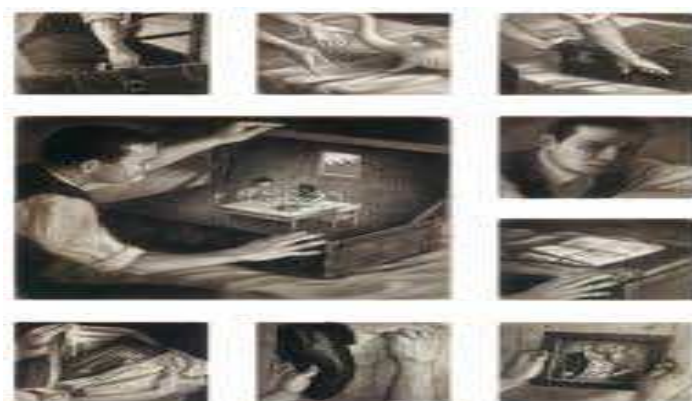

Figure 10

Then, the suitcase's tangible contents replace the ethereal image and the nostalgic husband nails the portrait to the wall with shoe. What is unique is the use of the cinematic techniques (zooming in and out) to capture the migrant's loneliness and powerlessness in a strange world.

The migrant's experience is set in a fantastical time and place. It is a wondrous world where giant ships fly, the natives domesticate mythical pets, full of dazzling architecture, cone-shaped houses, bizarre foods and an indecipherable alphabet. Regarding the Time/Place Logic, Gunther Kress writes, "whatever is represented in image has to bow to the logic of space, and the simultaneity of elements in spatial arrangements" (2). Similarly, Nikolajeva and Scott argue that "while words can only describe spatial dimensions, pictures can explore and play with them in limitless ways" (26). Drawing upon M. Bakhtin's concept of Chronotope, *The Arrival* possesses a multiple of chronotopes that give the story a visual vibrancy and surreal complexity. Bakhtin defines chronotope as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (165). He continues to explain that complicated chronotopes emerge when two different conjunctions of time and place reflect upon each other to "create metaphoric significance" (165). Complicated chronotopes – in *The Arrival* – take place in the dazzling blend between fantasy and realism as well as in the mini-narratives whose effect is to create both a physical and metaphorical journey within the simultaneous existence of the traveller's past, present and the future. Placing realistic human figures in a surreal city is a great artistic achievement to universalize the migrant's experience of fear and hope without setting a specific person, place, and time.

Tan's remarkable visual is also well-illustrated in the cloud imagery to evoke a sense of melancholy and gloominess during the migrant's dull sea voyage. On leaving his homeland, there is the foreboding cloud towering over the ship:

Figure 11

There is also the image of the migrants clustered on the bow of the deck of the ship with faces full of misery and pain. On approaching the new land, a flock of doves is seen within a change in color tone, that is, a warmer tones of grey instead of brown sepia tones and black shades. This foreshadows the acceptance of the arrivals in the new country:

Figure 12

Tan's visual construction is revealed in another cloud pattern and in the delineation of a fragile skeletal flower – borne out of a leaf and half-buried in snow – to signify the passage of time:

Figure 13

The two visual constructions symbolize both space and distance between the migrant and his family until they are reunited. Moreover, Tan's use of shades is very meaningful to alter the 'mood' of the old soldier. The old man's story has started in sepia when he recalls his old days as a strong and handsome soldier. As the story progresses, a war has taken

place and the sepia toned images are turned into shades of grey. This is artistically relevant to depict images of dead bodies and ash-covered ground evoking feelings of pathos and suffering in a flash back narration.

Finally, Tan's visuals are set in the zone between dreams and reality. This captures the timelessness of the migrant's universal feelings of fear and horror. The core of the visuals depict the pain of departure, the confusion of arrival and the defeated sense of dislocation and alienation and finally the glimmerings of hope in a *surrealist mood* to communicate discourses of migration and multiculturalism.

RECAPITULATIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

Hybridiy has entered many academic fields such as literature, anthropology, and postcolonial theories to examine diverse *cultural* identities. As a central concept in postcolonial discourse, hybridity is "celebrated and privileged as a kind of superior cultural intelligence owing to the advantage of in-betweens, the straddling of two cultures and the consequent ability to negotiates the difference" (Hoogvelt, 158). The *cosmopolitan* protagonist and the stories of survivals represent *recognition* of *heterogeneity* and *diversity*. Tan – in his visual narrative – seems to advocate a *utopian vision* of global community. He crystallizes a migrant's experience in a visual narrative form with a documentary flavor and with old pictorial archive. To draw this study to a close, *The Arrival* is a complex visual text worth of serious examination within postcolonial paradigm, a new approach that tackles the question of *multiculturalism* in panoramic illustrations that set a balance between both the negative and the positive sides of migration, a movement from a dystopic reality to a utopian future. The surrealistic art is functional in the sense that it helps avoid any specific cultural reference to any nationality.

CONCLUSIONS

Picture book is defined as "text, illustrations, total design, an item of manufacture and commercial product: *a social, cultural, historical document, and foremost, an experience for a child*" (Italics mine, Bader, 1). What is unique about the international award winning *The Arrival* is being an outstanding example of postmodern picturebook, a genre that has emerged in the past twenty years. In *Reading Contemporary Picturebooks* (2001), David Lewis uses the term "ecology" (47) to refer to the internal relationship of word and image in picturebooks. *The Arrival* – a wordless narrative- is made up of complex networks of relationships, that is, multiple strands interconnect to create a complex visual/surreal text. *The Arrival* is structured like a *picture novella* with six chapters and the format of sequential art is functional to visualize the unnamed protagonist's migration experience. In the absence of the text, paratextual features become significant to decipher meanings visually. Tan works with grey and sepia shadows that evoke the feelings of old photographs that create a story. He speaks about film-making rather than book illustration explaining his use of panels of small-size, medium-size, large-size pictures and multiple frames (www.shauntan.net)

In "The Artist's Note", Tan explains that "much of this book was inspired by anecdotal stories by migrants of many different countries and historical periods, including my father who came to Western Australia from Malaysia in 1960" (www.shauntan.net).

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